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ABSTRACT

Aggression is examined in this discussion of the role of television in the development of young children's social behaviors. The way aggression is interpreted by children watching television and program influences on the children's own aggressive behavior are among topics considered. Some suggestions are made in regard to context of aggression sequences, viewer's interpretation and maturity, and children's understanding of programs. Reactions of children to aggressive models and models of prosocial behavior are discussed. (ST)

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Contexts for Behavior in Television Programs and Children's Subsequent Behavior

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One of the developmental tasks that faces children is that of acquiring behaviors to use in interacting with other people, and of learning who can do what, under what conditions, with what consequences. For a number of years I've been interested in the role of television in the development of children's social behaviors and in the development of their models of when and how such behaviors should be carried out.

The models children acquire consist of the context surrounding various social behaviors. For instance, children learn which motives for pleasing someone else are acceptable and which aren't. They learn when to expect good consequences for pleasing someone and when to expect bad consequences. For example, what happens when a child "kisses up" to a teacher. A child who knows what social behaviors are possible and the contexts within which they could occur has all the information he or she needs to be socially competent. When that information is demonstrated by the child's behavior one finds a fully competent, social human being.

Models for the contexts of social behavior are acquired over time. They come from the integration and interplay of many different sources of socialization pressure. One of these sources in America is probably television.

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Television is very pervasive in our culture. 95% of the households in the United States have a tv set. Our children spend two to four hours a day watching. Most of what they see is social behavior and the context within which it occurs.

Donald Roberts, who is here today, and I have worked on the role of the television context for aggression in determining children's aggressive behavior. Andy Collins, who is also here today, worked with us on his dissertation research. We wanted to know what message about the context for aggressive behavior children received when they were watching television and how this influenced their own aggression. Did they learn that unjustified aggression is punished? Did they learn that aggression is America's favorite way to resolve conflict? What was the model children acquired from television about the circumstances under which they should aggress?

Let me give you some of our answers to these questions about the role of television in teaching social competence in the area of aggressive behavior:

1. Children understood more about the context for aggression as they matured. That is, for each aggressive act they know more about the motives for it and its consequences as they get older.
2. However, there was no evidence that children understood programs aimed at audiences their age better than programs aimed at older audiences. That is, five-year-olds didn't necessarily understand a cartoon like Rocket Robin Hood any better than they understood an adult crime show like Adam 12. This was true even though Rocket Robin Hood was written for young children and aired at a children's hour while Adam 12 was written for an adult audience and aired much later in the evening.

3. Children's aggression after watching a television program did not depend in any way upon the age group for which the show was produced.

These results are very important, though not unusual, in tv research. We still do not know very much about the kinds of programs that will appeal to young children and also give them the message we want to send. There's a lot to learn here.

Now let's turn to our findings about the effects of tv content on a child's subsequent aggression:

4. Neither the context within which aggression occurred in regular television programs nor the child's understanding of that context influenced how aggressive children were after viewing.
5. The context within which aggression occurred could influence how aggressive children were after viewing if that context was made much clearer than in regular television programs. When we made our own "shows" or edited regular programs so that the motives and consequences were very clear and consistent, children as young as four could be influenced by them.
6. However, with regular television programs the more aggression the program contained the more children aggressed afterwards, regardless of the context for the aggression from an adult point of view.
7. Finally, there was the suggestion that at certain ages children may be maximally receptive to regular television programming. They are competent enough to understand the aggressive message and find television credible enough to be affected behaviorally by its message. This, too, I think is an important consideration. We need to think of television's effects in terms of the content presented, the message the child receives from that content, and

the creditibility the child grants to television programs of the type he/she is watching.

So in our work young children are apparently learning from television that aggression is a good strategy or at least an exceedingly common one. They are not learning the contextual message that "crime doesn't pay" or that alternatives to aggression are desirable. When children are given a mixed message about the context for aggression on television, they come away believing simply that the more aggression they see the more they should aggress. This is especially true for younger children.

Yet we and the television industry persist in this strategy, believing that it teaches desirable social behavior. We even employ a similar strategy in teaching prosocial behavior.

Let's look for a minute at material that differs in its strategies for teaching social behavior. The first sequence presents interpersonal conflict that is eventually resolved by prosocial behaviors. In most respects it is like aggressive tv content. The seond presents only positive social behavior, and is relatively unusual on tv. The slides I'll show you are taken from off-the-air videotapes of Sesame Street programs. The action, of course, is much better with the movement and sound television provides.

The first sequence is known as "Share the Chair" and is relatively famous -- or infamous -- in some circles.

1. A boy and girl look at a chair with a dog in it.
2. The boy says, "It's my chair."
3. The girl says, "It's my chair."
4. They argue vehemently and for a good part of the segment.
5. The dog suggests sharing.
6. The boy and girl happily share.
7. The dog laments, "Me and my big mouth," as he sits on the floor.

As you've seen in this segment, children first fight over who can sit in a chair. The chair is already occupied by someone else and is big enough for at least two children. Then the dog -- not either child -- suggests sharing. The children happily share -- positive consequences for their positive behavior. But look at the dog. He had the chair, suggested sharing, and wound up on the floor -- negative consequences for his prosocial behavior. If this sort of format seems very familiar, it should. This is the usual context for positive social behavior on television.

Now let's look at the second sequence. It is known as "The Unhappy Hand." Once there was an unhappy hand:

1. It could scratch.
2. It could show approval.
3. It could snap its fingers, but that was only a very small noise.
4. The hand was very sad.
5. Then one day another hand appeared.
6. The two hands discovered they could clap together. The room resounds with applause.
7. The hand was very happy.

This segment stands in marked contrast to the preceding one. Here the hand by itself is lonely, unhappy. It does not rejoice in its opportunity to control all the resources, direct all its own activities, and so on. When the second hand comes, the two find that together they can do much more interesting things than they can separately. The piece ends with a joyous round of applause -- not an unhappy hand in the place. "The Unhappy Hand" is unusual in television programming.

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The two pieces you have just seen differ in a number of ways. There are indications from television research that these differences might matter in their effects on children. For instance, we know that children learn what they see. If we show them interpersonal conflict, like that in "Share the Chair," won't they learn it? We also know that positive consequences are likely to increase the behavior they follow, while negative consequences are likely to decrease it. Won't the very real portrayal of happy children and an unhappy dog suggest that sharing is not always so desirable?

The two pieces differ on a number of other dimensions about which we know less in terms of their effects on children. 'Share the Chair" has dialogue among the three characters while "The Unhappy Hand" has a voice-over that is very explicit. Unfortunately we know little about which would be more effective. 'Share the Chair' is a cartoon with human and animal characters. 'The Unhappy Hand' is videotaped live action by a human hand, representing humans in some way. Once again, we know little about which techniques and what kinds of characters are more influential with young children.

Given that we think that exposure to a behavior and uniform consequences associated with it will affect a child's subsequent behavior, why is positive social behavior so often presented in the first context rather than in the second? Why do we show conflict and both positive and negative consequences for positive social behavior when we're trying to encourage positive behavior? There are four reasons I think:

1. Production and artistic staff believe that conflict material is much more interesting to the viewer. This is true among writers and producers of both children's and adults' programs.

2. Many believe the first strategy is closer to reality than the second -- people usually fight and usually prefer to control all the resources. And these people claim that television should teach reality.
3. Many believe a child can't recognize the relationship between a potential conflict situation on tv and those he or she encounters in his or her life unless the conflict is explicitly portrayed on tv.
4. Many believe that children will reliably integrate the events of a program over time and get the final, intended message from it. We've already seen that this may not be true for television and aggressive behaviors. Is the same true for prosocial behaviors?

Right now I am investigating these questions about the most effective ways to encourage positive social behavior with television, while still entertaining children. Television is a mass medium and it must entertain. But hopefully we can at the same time learn to use it to encourage our children in behaviors and beliefs consonant with our own values. I hope some of that will come from the work I'm currently doing.